

Aging grows on farms

Programs seek young producers

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In 1987, Kentucky had 1,703 farmers under the age of 25.

When the last census was completed in 2002, that number had dropped to 664.

For the same time span, the statistics look nearly as bleak for those in the critical 25-to-34 age bracket. The number fell from 10,713 to 4,400.

The average age of Kentucky's farmer now stands at 55.2, up from 52.2 in 1987. That number is consistent with many ag-based states across the nation. The graying of America's farmers is a topic of conversation from Congress to the cornfield.

And there are implications for every community, ag experts warn.

For years, they have fought to bring new farmers into the fold -- without much success.

Several factors squeeze out newcomers. Existing producers continue to get bigger, often creating fierce competition for acreage.

In the search for more land to rent, some Union County farmers cross into counties in southern Illinois. They travel to Henderson, Webster, Hopkins and McLean counties, too, said Rankin Powell, Union County extension agent.

"We had one family that went as far as Mississippi," Powell said.

Urban sprawl also consumes a good percentage of the nation's tillable land each year, driving up the

price of cropland.

Finally, steep capital costs for land, equipment and livestock turn off many lenders.

Keith Rogers, executive director of the Governor's Office of Agricultural Policy, farmed for 15 years before heading into politics. He's been active in ag policy for 25 years.

"This is an issue that's always been around," Rogers said.

But it's grown important enough that his office -- formed in 2000 to assist tobacco communities in the transition from tobacco-based economies to other ag products -- has redirected some of its activities. In November, the state Agricultural Development Board established a new priority for the Governor's Office of Agricultural Policy: Renew efforts to develop new and part-time farmers.

That directive recently gave birth to the state's Beginning Farmer Loan program. The state board approved \$2 million in an effort to improve newcomers' chances.

In October, the University of Missouri Extension Service was the first location in the state to start a program titled Farm Beginnings: Preparing a New Generation of Farmers. The program formed in Minnesota in the 1980s and also has grown into Nebraska and Illinois.

Farm Beginnings is under the umbrella of the Land Stewardship Project, a private, nonprofit organization that offers no-interest loans to new farmers who qualify. Requirements include completion of Farm Beginnings courses.

About 15 people signed up for the first set of classes at the University of Missouri, said Randy Saner, extension agent and program director. Unfortunately, most of the participants were 40- and 50-somethings who were looking for second or retirement incomes. Only three couples were in their 20s or 30s.

Farming doesn't draw the younger crowd, Saner said, because equipment and land are too pricey. Young professionals can make better incomes elsewhere without financial risks.

"We can train people all we want, but if we don't invest in them, it won't work," Saner said.

In the early 1990s, Roger Johnson administered the FarmLink program in North Dakota. Johnson is now the state's ag commissioner.

FarmLink sought to bond would-be producers who had the desire to farm but didn't have access to land or finances with retiring operators who didn't have family to take over their operations. The idea swept much of the Midwest at the time, Johnson said.

The program had merit, he said, but it failed after a few years. Plenty of beginning farmers enrolled, but state officials couldn't find enough mentors to pair with them. The majority of retiring farmers who showed interest were financially strapped and couldn't offer a leg up to an aspiring producer.

Since then, other programs have come and gone. North Dakota now has its own beginning farmer loan program, much like Kentucky's. Johnson said the state is seeing increased interest.

Its all boils down to profits, and farmers' margins continue to be slim, Johnson said.

However, he sees hope for the industry in higher petroleum prices. While the rising cost of oil-based products adds enormous cost pressure to the ag industry, an increase in ethanol production could create a boon for producers, Johnson said.

Cellulose ethanol is now being produced with grass, wheat straw and wood chips, he said. A new facility that will produce 50 million gallons of ethanol a year is being built in central North Dakota.

"I think there will be lots of opportunities for people to get jobs and start farms where they will be raising cellulose," Johnson said.
